



RESEARCH PRIORITIES  
FOR INDIGENOUS  
CHILDREN & YOUTH

**PREPARED FOR**  
**THE CENTRE FOR BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH IN CANCER CONTROL, CURTIN UNIVERSITY**  
**AND THE AUSTRALIAN RESEARCH ALLIANCE FOR CHILDREN & YOUTH**



**SNAICC**

**SECRETARIAT OF NATIONAL ABORIGINAL AND ISLANDER CHILD CARE INC.**

The use of the term "Indigenous" throughout this document is intended to be interpreted as Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander peoples, communities and groups.

## **DISCLAIMER**

The views expressed throughout this report are the views of people who were consulted during the project and authors of material as referenced within the report (see Bibliography). The views expressed are not necessarily the views of SNAICC staff or members.

## **PREPARED BY**

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September 2004



**S N A I C C**

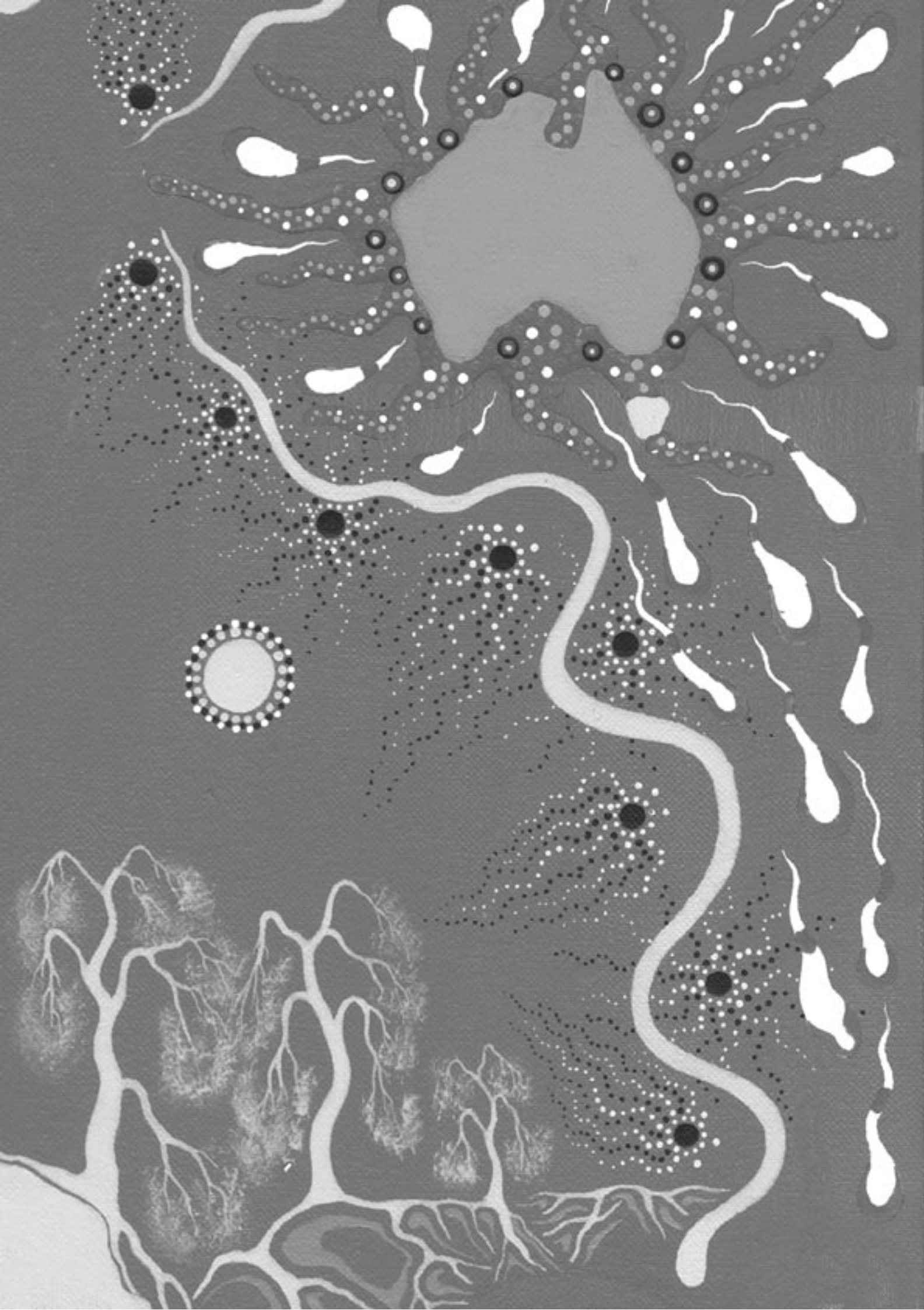
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# BACKGROUND

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The Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Inc. (SNAICC) have prepared this report on behalf of the Centre for Behavioural Research in Cancer Control, Curtin University. The request by Curtin University to produce this report came about due to an undertaking by Curtin to the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth (ARACY) to identify research priorities for Australian children and young people. The purpose of identifying these research priorities is to assist ARACY in determining where it should focus its future research efforts.

Curtin University formally approached SNAICC to assist with this project given its expertise in Indigenous child and youth issues.

The report is based upon previous research activities conducted by SNAICC and others, as well as further consultations with practitioners working with Indigenous children and youth. The focus of the research is based upon the experience of practitioners and their perception of the issues affecting Indigenous children and youth.

## **HISTORICAL FACTORS**

The forced removal and separation of Indigenous people in Australia is undoubtedly the most critical issue affecting Indigenous people today. It is impossible to consider responses to current issues without acknowledging or addressing the impact of forced removals and assimilation.

The impact of separation from family, community and land has denied generations of Indigenous people the opportunity to experience their traditional lifestyles, which has been discovered to exist for over 40,000 years. The inter-generational affects resulting from forced removals have profoundly impacted on Indigenous people.

The implications include dispossession of land and traditional culture, breakdown of community kinship systems and Aboriginal lore, racism and vilification, economic exclusion and entrenched poverty, loss of identity, inherited grief and trauma, the adaptation of gender roles – both male and female<sup>1</sup>; poor nutrition and general health, inadequate housing and lack of educational and employment opportunity.

## **CONFLICT: INDIGENOUS CHILD REARING VS NON-INDIGENOUS CHILD REARING PRACTICES**

Assimilation, the denial of opportunity to develop a natural bond with parents, and lack of culturally relevant role models has resulted in confusion and uncertainty for today's Indigenous parents. Many Indigenous parents state they want their children to experience and be taught cultural norms and traditions – to be raised in a manner that embraces their Indigenous heritage, but feel the expectations and demands of “white law” is in conflict with this desire. (SNAICC/Swinburne 2004).

Research undertaken in semi-remote and remote communities indicates a very different approach in regards to raising children and childhood development than that of the non-Indigenous community. Key principles in traditional child rearing include the Dreaming, the Law, family, the land and the child's responsibilities and relationships between all these things. Children are seen as “little people” and are gradually introduced to their obligations in regard to Dreaming and the Law. Traditional beliefs are consistent and practices do not change over time. (Dept. Family & Community Services – Aboriginal Child Rearing Strategy, 2002)

Non-Indigenous child development beliefs and practices are based on research and have very specific milestone and achievement based expectations. They change over time depending on the latest research findings and are arguably influenced by commercialism, major international corporations and governments. In contrast with traditional beliefs, children are seen as helpless and requiring guidance.

If we give due consideration to aforementioned historical factors impinging on Indigenous people today, along with acknowledgement of conflicting demands and expectations in regards to child rearing and developmental beliefs, then we can begin to understand the complexity of issues faced by Indigenous parents and their children.

# SUMMARY OF RESEARCH PROJECT

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Whilst there is a plethora of information available nationally and internationally in regards to children and young people, in fact there is not a great deal of national research which has been undertaken in regards to Indigenous children and youth in Australia.

In fact the task of identifying research priorities for Indigenous children and youth is a challenge in itself, given that Indigenous communities generally do not individualise focus on children and young people, but see them rather as members of family and community.

SNAICC identified research priorities for children and young people for this report through the following methods:

- Practitioner/stakeholder consultation survey
- Review of the findings from the 2004 SNAICC Parenting Information project (which included parent/family and practitioner focus groups)
- Review of SNAICC Annual General Meeting and National Executive minutes from 1999 to 2003
- Brief review of national published data reports on Indigenous children and families including ABS and AIHW reports
- Consultation with SNAICC National Executive members representing all States and Territories

A challenge presenting during this project was the difficulty of interpreting the term and notion of "Research Priorities". Given the nature of responses, it would seem the practitioners whom SNAICC consulted found difficulty in differentiating between service gap priorities and research priorities. SNAICC feels this is a reflection of the high need for more Indigenous services and the unfamiliarity of practitioners with developing strategic research questions. There was also a focus on improved program and service evaluation as an area of research that should be a high priority. SNAICC considers that this stems from the frustration services experience when their effective work is not recognised, rewarded, continued or extended.

Existing research indicates the need for a holistic approach when considering policy development, program and service delivery to Indigenous communities. A holistic approach in this sense would be seen in a multiplicity of ways i.e. including community members in the development, design and implementation of programs, as well as consideration for all family members when thinking about target groups. This is because family is an important aspect of cultural identity for Indigenous people - family includes children, siblings, parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles.

A preference for Action Research models is a consistent message received by SNAICC when undertaking projects, during membership meetings such as the SNAICC Annual General Meeting, and seminars. It is the view that Action Research is the most appropriate model to use when researching issues effecting Indigenous people.

SNAICC considers that this preference is a reflection of the understandable hesitancy of communities and agencies to trust outside researchers with information regarding families and children. Particularly given the history of non-Indigenous researchers and authorities making negative and racially prejudiced judgements about Indigenous families, cultures and child rearing practices.

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

**That ARACY prioritise research with and for Indigenous children, young people and practitioners which is based on Action Research models and community control of research process and outcomes.**

**That ARACY document good practice guidelines and case studies for doing research with Indigenous communities including the following principles:**

- Talking directly with Indigenous children and young people
- Talking directly with their parents, grandparents and other extended family members where appropriate
- Talking directly with community Elders where appropriate
- The research process aims to include and provide an educative and problem solving aspect for Indigenous people involved in the research
- Indigenous community control over research process and findings
- Recognition of the many differing Indigenous cultural and language groups within Australia

**That ARACY document good practice guidelines in relation to service and program evaluation including case studies of effective evaluation**

This report endeavours to maintain a focus on children and youth, but cannot exclude the impact of family issues and the need to consider children and youth within the context of family. Nor can we exclude historical factors that impact on Indigenous children today.

Recently SNAICC completed a nationally based research project focussing on parenting information and support. This

project included national consultations with parents and caregivers, as well as practitioners working with Indigenous parents and caregivers. SNAICC has drawn on the findings of the National Parenting Information Project as well as other recent national and state or territory based research projects, and outcomes from SNAICC membership meetings and seminars to form the recommendations included here.

The Research Priorities for Indigenous Children and Youth project brief required SNAICC to advise of research priorities for Indigenous children and youth in regard to all aspects of their life i.e. health and wellbeing, education, family income, employment opportunity, recreation and the arts. Again, it is difficult to report on any one of these areas without considering the impact of factors from other areas. This has also been reflected in responses given to survey questions, with many respondents providing answers that are of a holistic nature and context.

The dimensions of this task are in fact as broad and complex as the task of ARACY developing an overall research agenda. SNAICC has developed this report on the presumption that ARACY are cognisant of the fact that the process of identifying research priorities for Indigenous Children and Youth is an ongoing process. ARACY will need to maintain links with SNAICC and other Indigenous organisations to continually identify and assess emerging research priorities for Indigenous children and families.

***RECOMMENDATION:***

That ARACY through discussion with SNAICC and other Indigenous organisations establish a process for identifying and assessing emerging research priorities for Indigenous children and young people



# SUMMARY OF RECOMMENDATIONS

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The recommendations provided by SNAICC in regards to the research priorities for Indigenous children and youth have been made in accordance to the process already described under “Summary of Research Project”. The logic for these recommendations has been derived by the same, along with clear evidence being provided throughout this report of how SNAICC has come to its conclusions. A large proportion of the recommendations has been made based on the consultations with practitioners undertaken during this project. Please read “Summary of Responses” for a detailed description of practitioners’ feedback.

These recommendations have been endorsed by the SNAICC National Executive members and as requested, are intended to provide advice to ARACY on where it should prioritise its future research efforts. Herewith is a summary of the recommendations in the order that they appear throughout this document:

That ARACY prioritise research with and for Indigenous children, young people and practitioners which is based on Action Research models and community control of research process and outcomes.

That ARACY document good practice guidelines and case studies for doing research with Indigenous communities including the following principles:

- Talking directly with Indigenous children and young people
- Talking directly with their parents, grandparents and other extended family members where appropriate
- Talking directly with community Elders where appropriate
- The research process aims to include and provide an educative and problem solving aspect for Indigenous people involved in the research
- Indigenous community control over research process and findings
- Recognition of the many differing Indigenous cultural and language groups within Australia

That ARACY document good practice guidelines in relation to service and program evaluation including case studies of effective evaluation

That ARACY through discussion with SNAICC and other Indigenous organisations establish a process for identifying and assessing emerging research priorities for Indigenous children and young people

That ARACY develop a national database of Indigenous research projects that is accessible to all professionals

working, advocating, researching or developing programs for Indigenous families and children.

That ARACY make the national database of Indigenous research projects culturally relevant and accessible by working with Indigenous people and practitioners in regards to the format of the database. (For instance it may be appropriate to ensure hard copies of research projects are made available for those who do not have access to an electronic database.)

Research how best to improve knowledge and understanding of the following issues and document case studies or examples of evaluated service and program responses:

- Foetal Alcohol Syndrome
- Antenatal care
- Dental care in young children
- Good nutrition for babies and young children for Indigenous people living in urban, rural and remote communities

Research possibility of link between child immunisation rates, and the incidence of infections such as Otitis Media, as well as the proximity of families to Aboriginal Health Services (this should include consultation with organisations such as the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation – NACCHO).

Research in relation the childcare arrangements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families including:

- the use of formal services, (Indigenous and non-Indigenous)
- financial and other barriers to accessing formal childcare arrangements
- parental attitudes to formal childcare and preschool programs
- use of informal care arrangements
- preferred models for service delivery, (long day care, family day care, facilitated playgroups, occasional care, mobile service and others)
- correlation between participation in childcare and preschool services and successful transition to school
- cultural relevance of programs and compatibility with Indigenous child rearing values and practices

Research into the impact of state and territory licensing requirements/restrictions for children’s services on:

the development/retardation of the Indigenous children's services sector and different service models (family day care, long day care etc).

Documenting case studies of 'best practice' in Indigenous childcare including the transition of informal childcare arrangements into more formal models of care and; facilitated playgroups and on how best to establish and run a supported Indigenous playgroup.

Comparative studies on child development and the impact of culture and family practices on different aspects of child development, (cognitive, social, physical, etc)

An analysis of attachment theories in the context of communal child rearing, shared parenting within a kinship group and Indigenous child rearing practices

Document case studies (national and international) to show the validity and value of different cultures approaches to child rearing and nurturing

Research on the impact of strong positive cultural identity in Indigenous children on their development across the life course.

Document case studies of 'Good Parenting' for Indigenous children and multiple approaches to growth, development, security & attachment.

Research and evaluate Australian or international programs that utilise schools as "hubs" for the provision of a broad range of family and children's services; include a focus on urban, rural or isolated communities and Indigenous communities.

Research with Indigenous young men about their perceptions of the significant male persons in their life, what constitutes a positive role model and the way young men choose role models.

Undertake research on how to encourage young Indigenous men to take up nurturing roles within their families and communities including professional and non-professional roles such as fathers, carers, teachers, nurses, counsellors, social workers etc (nurturing and positive role modelling roles).

Research the most effective parenting peer support programs and peer based parenting education and awareness programs for young people.

Research the compliance across States, territories and regions with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle and factors which impact on compliance including:

- Cultural knowledge, awareness and understanding of staff and others involved in child protection agencies
- Availability of specialist Indigenous agencies in the field of child protection to influence decision making in relation to child protection matters
- Availability of alternative care placements for children at risk of abuse or neglect
- Levels and forms of support, (financial and non-financial) for fostering children
- Parental and family knowledge of child protection issues (what constitutes abuse or neglect) and the child protection process

Research the impact on Indigenous children of policy and practice that is not culturally relevant including the placement of children in non-Indigenous care

Research factors that contribute to placement stability and promote child well being within out-of-home care

Research the impact of culture and cultural identity in building children's resilience

Research cultural and other bias in the development and application of risk assessment frameworks in relation to the identification of child abuse and child neglect within statutory child protection systems

Research factors which influence the decision making of government child protection staff with statutory powers in relation to the best interests of Indigenous children notified as being at risk of abuse or neglect

Research the impact on children of trauma, including inter-generational trauma, associated with child abuse and neglect, the extent to which symptoms of trauma are recognised and the responses

Research on the experiences and difficulties of Indigenous foster, relative and kinship carers (including grand parents) and how they could be better supported.

Research the benefits of strengths based practice for parenting and family support programs and services

Consult Indigenous children and young people about who they talk to about their problems or feelings, the importance and efficacy of peer based support programs for responding to trauma, grief and loss and whether there is a need for an Indigenous peer support service based on the Kids Help Line model.

Research into the operation and effectiveness of child protection systems for older children including rates of

child protection notifications, substantiations and service responses for Indigenous children and young people in the 13 plus age group.

Research into the pathways to independence for young people leaving care including models for supporting young people leaving care.

Research the extent to which Indigenous young people and families who are eligible for various Commonwealth income support payments actually access these payments and whether particularly focussing on families with children, young people not in full time education and unemployed young people.

Research other (international) welfare systems to examine the portability of family income support payments to 'follow the child' and take account of Indigenous child rearing practices and informal kinship care arrangements

Research on the leisure time activities of Indigenous children and young people across all age and income groups including levels of participation in sporting and recreation clubs

Research into why Indigenous parents tend not to access mainstream childcare services and the issues around cultural relevance and affordability.

Research into informal childcare arrangements to learn more about why parents use informal childcare.

Research Indigenous parents' attitudes toward education, rates of children's attendance at school, and what can be done to improve support to families in relation to both these issues.

Research into the numbers of Indigenous young people who are not engaged full time in either education or employment or a combination of the two and appropriate program based response for metropolitan, rural and remote areas.

Research employer attitudes regarding the employment of Indigenous young people in their organisations/companies.

Evaluation and research of CDEP programs and where it leads to sustainable long term employment outcomes.

Evaluation and research of JPET (Job Placement Employment and Training) type programs (those that link young people back to education and employment), and including the rates of participation of Indigenous young people. This may include:

- A meta-evaluation of existing evaluations
- Break down of age groups accessing programs to determine whether there is an age range where such a program would be "most successful" in terms of attaining positive outcomes for Indigenous young people
- Determining whether there is a window of opportunity (best time) to successfully engage with young Indigenous people once they leave school with the aim of linking them to tertiary education and/or employment and if so, whether there is a limited time frame for this to occur.

Research into what proportion of SAAP (Supported Accommodation Assistance Program) users are Indigenous and are they accessing/not accessing these services.

Document good practice for services that are engaging well with Indigenous young people.

Research into links between homelessness of young Indigenous people and the rates of child protection notifications that are not followed up or substantiated.

Given most structured recreational activities have become income based and cost involved, research into how low income Indigenous families can access recreational activities, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Research and document any correlation of issues concerning the over representation of Indigenous people in the protective and corrective systems.

Undertake research to compare diversionary program statistics and evaluation of programs for Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people in all states and territories.

That ARACY undertake qualitative long term research that links back to the 7 key areas for change identified by the SCRGSP to assist in providing a more complete measurement of Government performance against the indicators.

Research the sort of discipline techniques that work or don't work from both the parents and child's perspective including the appropriateness of different methods of disciplining children at different points in a child or young person's development.

Research the possibility of bias of police and welfare workers toward Indigenous disciplining methods.

# IDENTIFIED RESEARCH PRIORITY AREAS

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The people who were surveyed for this project were requested to identify, in order of priority, the issue areas they feel should be researched by ARACY.

The single most important aspect of the message received from respondents to this survey, is that culture and traditions have been lost for most Indigenous children and young people, and that every area of their lives, including the areas identified as priority for research, should include a cultural education component. This is equally applicable to parents and people working with Indigenous families and children.

The majority of respondents named PROTECTIVE ISSUES (including parenting education, nurturing & security, parental substance use and family violence issues) as the most urgent priority, closely followed by HEALTH & NUTRITION, EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION & DEVELOPMENT, then CULTURAL EDUCATION & WELL BEING. Education and Housing were also seen as priority areas, but not identified by the majority of respondents as being the most important areas requiring immediate research attention. The least named areas were Employment & Income, Juvenile Justice and Recreation and the Arts.

From this we assume the majority of respondents are concerned about the impact of parents behaviour, knowledge and skills on children. In addition to this, a large number of respondents said they are interested in a study that would measure the impact of traditional child rearing practices on protective concerns and whether the over representation of Indigenous people in the protective system would be affected if more parents practised traditional child rearing methods.

It is interesting to note the perspective of young people themselves, compared to the responses of this survey. Kids Help Line statistics (July 2004) indicate that Indigenous young people who contact the help line are mostly concerned about family relationships. Nearly half of the Indigenous young people who call KHL report experiencing frequent or major family conflict.

In terms of Health and Nutrition, respondents are mainly concerned about the impact of inadequate nutrition on the child's behaviour and ability to learn, as well as how to restrain prevalent diseases and infections such as Otitis Media, that can have long term affects on children.

Childcare and development and early childhood education were also named by respondents as important areas for research priority. In particular, the impact of participation in early childhood education on later years, whether it builds resilience in children, and the impact of transition to school. More specifically, some respondents are interested in a comparison of outcomes (transition to school, resilience and retention and attainment of future educational outcomes)

between metropolitan, rural and remote Indigenous childcare centres. Others would like to see a study of the impact of early intervention childcare and preschool centres (providing family support and parenting information) and subsequent attendance at school, protective notifications etc.

Cultural Education, Health and Wellbeing, is identified throughout all other "issue" areas as a priority for Indigenous people, although named as a priority area for research in itself. Culture and traditions once underpinned the way all Indigenous people lived their lives, providing them with rules and guidelines on how to live. Given the erosion of Indigenous traditions and culture over the years since colonisation occurred, and the amount of research that has been done which describes the reasons why Indigenous people have experienced marginalisation and disadvantage, we feel cultural issues should not be researched in exclusion of other life areas. For example, respondents want to see the restoration of cultural health as a means to change the cycle of poverty and abuse that encompasses a large proportion of Indigenous people.

Respondents would also like to see integration of culture in Education and are interested to see what impacts on levels of participation and endurance of schooling this, as well as other issues has on Indigenous children and young people.

In terms of Education, respondents are also concerned about the training and professional development of Indigenous social welfare workers who work with Indigenous families.

# CONSULTATION PROCESS

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As part of the overall methodology for this project, over 400 surveys were sent to identified key stakeholders from Indigenous organisations specialising in child, youth or family welfare. This includes Aboriginal & Islander Child Care Agencies, Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services, domestic violence and family support services, maternal child health nurses and Indigenous health workers, regional councils and ATSIC offices.

SNAICC received back a total of 34 surveys giving us a response rate of just over 8 per cent. A contributing factor to the low return rate could be the very short timeframe given which also reflects the limited timeframe of the project. However responses are somewhat concurrent in nature as described below, and do provide a sound basis for further investigations.

The survey (see Appendix I) was sent out with a brief outline of the project and its aims (see Appendix II).

Key stakeholders were asked to identify what they perceive as the main issues impacting on Indigenous children and youth, in different areas of the child's life i.e. health, care and development, protection, family income and employment status, education, housing situation, recreation and the arts, juvenile justice and crime. Each area was split into age groups categories being 0-5 years (including antenatal), 6-12 years and 13 years plus, so respondents were required to identify at least one issue for each age group. Once issues were identified, key stakeholders were requested to decide which issues should be the priority for research. Below, listed in order of majority of responses, are the areas key stakeholders named as priority for research:

- Family violence, abuse, parental addictions and other protective factors
- Nutrition (particularly in the 0-5 year old age group)
- Positive Indigenous child rearing practices, and cultural, emotional and social wellbeing
- Education (including preschool, primary and secondary) as well as parenting education
- Housing situation
- Racism

It must be acknowledged that these areas are all somewhat inter-related and any further research undertaken in any area should not be in isolation. However, for the purpose of reporting on survey responses, we have developed categories - these categorised areas are discussed further under Summary of Responses.

Key stakeholders were also asked if they were aware of any national research in relation to Indigenous children and young people that SNAICC should review for this project. Only 10 respondents commented here, with 2 actually identifying national research projects and the others being either State based projects or articles from national journals. The minimal number of responses here is interesting to note and could be a reflection of the lack of national research around Indigenous children and youth matters. Another point could be a lack of awareness of the research that has been done which in turn highlights the need for a national database of research projects made accessible to professionals working with families and children.

## ***RECOMMENDATION:***

**That ARACY develop a national database of Indigenous research projects that is accessible to all professionals working, advocating, researching or developing programs for Indigenous families and children.**

**That ARACY make the national database of Indigenous research projects culturally relevant and accessible by working with Indigenous people and practitioners in regards to the format of the database. (For instance it may be appropriate to ensure hard copies of research projects are made available for those who do not have access to an electronic database.)**

# SUMMARY OF SURVEY RESPONSES

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This summary of responses was compiled to provide an overview of the issues identified by practitioners who were consulted during the research process.

As requested by Curtin University, SNAICC has summarised the responses according to life areas, ie. health and wellbeing, education, family income, employment opportunity, recreation and the arts, and then according to significant age groups, i.e. 0-5 years (including antenatal), 6-12 years, and 13 years plus.

A detailed compilation of all survey responses can be found at Appendix III.

## HEALTH

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### **0-5 YEAR OLDS (INCLUDING ANTENATAL)**

In regards to health, respondents named NUTRITION as the area which should be given the most priority for further research, and nutrition was also the most commonly identified issue for the 0-5 year old age group. Comments about children eating too many processed foods high in fat and sugar were made, particularly for those in remote areas where fresh food is scarce and expensive. Another factor mentioned is that people on low incomes tend to purchase convenience foods rather than fresh foods, or very little food is purchased when income is spent on gambling or alcohol.

Nutrition during pregnancy is also an issue in Indigenous communities due to factors such as lack of knowledge of antenatal care, the incidence of Foetal Alcohol Syndrome and diets high in processed carbohydrates and saturated fat. Zubrick et al (2004), state the “adequacy of nutrition during pregnancy and childhood is important for preventing a number of chronic diseases which may emerge in later life,” and that “...there is surprisingly little population data available to monitor changes in the dietary intake of Indigenous children.” Despite this, evidence shows that traditional Indigenous diet of bush tucker is high in protein and rich in fibre.

Research indicates another issue that results from inadequate nutritional care during pregnancy (if not premature) is low birth weight. The SCRGSP (2003) report states that during the two year period of 1998-2000, low birth weight was twice as high for Indigenous mothers than their non-Indigenous counterparts 11.9%: 6.0%). Low birth weight has been found to possibly contribute to foetal growth retardation and later onset of chronic diseases such as diabetes.

Respondents expressed concern about the impact of poor nutrition during the early years on children’s cognitive and physical development, as well as Foetal Alcohol Syndrome during pregnancy.

Responses from communities where English is a second language indicates there are problems with understanding and implementing nutritional requirements. A suggested way of addressing this issue has been previously recommended by SNAICC (Indigenous Parenting Project, 2004). Recommendations in this report suggest funding be provided to local communities to produce their own parenting information products so that they may be locally relevant, highly visual and be written in community language(s).

HYGIENE was named as another related factor to overall health care of children where poor hygiene and nutrition was named as contributing to the incidence of ear, nose and throat infections, as well as problems with teeth. Respondents reported tooth decay was a major problem due to poor nutrition and hygiene.

Otitis Media (middle ear infection) was reported by respondents as being a very common problem that results in hearing impairments and consequent learning disabilities.

Malnutrition has been considered to be associated with the development of Otitis Media, however few studies have actually evaluated this relationship. Other risk factors might include bacterial colonisation – especially in the first 3 months of life, infection in family members (particularly in overcrowded houses) and high rates of smoking. (SCRGSP, 2003) Indigenous children are more than twice as likely than non-Indigenous children to suffer long term diseases of the ear (ABS, 2002 as cited in SCRGSP, 2003). Up to 95 percent of 6-8 week old Indigenous infants suffer from otitis media and up to 70 per cent of Indigenous adults may have some form of hearing loss (OATSIH 2001, in SCRGSP 2003).

Environmental circumstances also contribute to hygiene issues due to parent’s housing situation where houses are overcrowded, not maintained well, or generally unsuitable to live in. (Housing circumstances will be discussed further in this report.)



### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Research how best to improve knowledge and understanding of the following issues and document case studies or examples of evaluated service and program responses:

- Foetal Alcohol Syndrome
- Antenatal care
- Dental care in young children
- Good nutrition for babies and young children for Indigenous people living in urban, rural and remote communities

### **6-12 YEAR OLDS**

Responses indicate concern about similar issues faced by the earlier age group in regards to NUTRITION.

However, the issues for this age group go a step further with respondents stating there is concern about PERSONAL SUBSTANCE USE in this age group, problems associated with children “acting out” i.e. learned behaviours and possibly being mis-diagnosed as ADHD, the impact of all of this on their primary education – inability to concentrate due to lack of appropriate nutritional intake and issues at home.

Many respondents are concerned about the impact of family violence and parental substance use on this age group, particularly in regards to the child’s mental, social, emotional and cultural well being.

### **13 YEARS PLUS**

The issues experienced by this age group, according to our respondents can be seen as a manifestation of the earlier years. Workers who completed the survey are concerned about the following health issues for adolescents:

- Personal & parental substance use
- Depression & suicidal ideations
- Acting out through boredom
- Sexual activity & early pregnancies
- Peer pressure
- Lack of appropriate nutritional intake
- Ongoing cultural, spiritual, emotional and social well being issues

### **GENERAL HEALTH ISSUE – ALL AGE GROUPS**

Responses to the survey indicate concern about access to health services, particularly in rural and remote areas. A lack of access to health services is an issue for Indigenous people due to factors such as “...location of services, low Medicare enrolments among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, financial barriers such as up-front costs, culturally inappropriate services and poor linkages between the various health sectors.” (Zubrick et al, 2004)

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Research possibility of link between child immunisation rates, and the incidence of infections such as Otitis Media, as well as the proximity of families to Aboriginal Health Services (this should include consultation with organisations such as the National Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Organisation – NACCHO).

# CHILD CARE & DEVELOPMENT

## 0-5 YEAR OLDS (INCLUDING ANTENATAL)

The most common responses for this age group were in relation to a lack of parental education in regards to childhood development and understanding of the need for nurturing children's early experiences of childhood education and its associated benefits.

Respondents state they are concerned about the lack of parents' knowledge for the following:

- Boundary setting, the need for constant supervision, guidance instruction and support
- Encouraging literacy and numeracy learning
- Lack of knowledge of developmental milestones
- "Appropriate" parent/child interactions

Comments in relation to the above indicate respondents feel this lack of knowledge stems from "cross generational interference in parenting by governments", but also state that communities could be more pro-active in terms of dealing with this issue, by encouraging participation in educative workshops. Ideally for this to occur, communities would need to be well resourced by governments in order to redress the problems faced by parents and communities.

Respondents feel there is a lack of appropriate role modelling for this age group due to a lack of understanding of the importance of modelling appropriate behaviour. Comments also indicate that a general lack of knowledge results in low expectations from parents and attachment issues.

Lack of access to culturally appropriate childcare services is also highlighted as a major issue. This could be due to a number of reasons including inadequate funding of, and, number of Indigenous specific childcare services

(Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services and others), remote and rural locations not adequately serviced, cost of childcare, and lack of parent's understanding of benefits of childcare. Indeed many Indigenous parents prefer to make use of family and friends when they require assistance to care for their children (ABS 1995 in AIHW 2001-02), however the issue of Indigenous children being under represented in Commonwealth funded child care services remains. In 2002, SNAICC prepared a briefing paper for the Commonwealth ChildCare Reference Group, which outlined the following:

*Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children remain significantly under represented in all forms of Commonwealth funded child care and over represented in our state based systems of child protection. Put simply the challenge we all face is improve access for Indigenous children to early childhood education services, including child care, and provide Indigenous children with a better start in life. Investing now in the early years will greatly assist in keeping Indigenous children out of the child protection and juvenile justice systems in later years.*

*In relation to childcare and pre school education access by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and families falls well behind that of the rest of the Australian community. Of even greater concern is the fact that access by Indigenous children to these services is declining.*

*Based on the 1999 Child Care Census and according to the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare there are approximately 7000 Indigenous children participating in some form of Commonwealth funded child care.*

Service Type	MACS	Long day care	Occasional care	Mobiles	OSSHC	FDC	Other	Total
<b>Indigenous Children</b>								
Number	1207	3766	89	199	858	792	57	6968
%	17.3	54.0	1.3	2.9	12.3	11.4	0.8	100

Source: The Health and Welfare of Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples 2001. AIHW. cat no 4704.0

Respondents are worried about children not learning important literacy and numeracy skills at this age due to lack of access to childcare and parents lack of knowledge or ability to pass these skills onto children. This can of course affect the child's language and cognitive development, and could be the commencement of learning disabilities.

SNAICC has already done much work in regards to the perception of a lack of parenting skills. Community activities, cultural centres, facilitated and supported informal "workshops" have been found to provide families with opportunities to talk about their parenting issues and to learn about "appropriate" parenting practices. The SNAICC Parenting Project (2004) found that parents want informal, locally designed and developed parenting information products and programs and are more likely to participate in parenting groups if they are not called parenting groups. For instance, supported playgroups were identified as a positive and appropriate way to disseminate parenting information to Indigenous parents.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Research in relation the childcare arrangements of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander families including:

- the use of formal services, (Indigenous and non-Indigenous)
- financial and other barriers to accessing formal childcare arrangements
- parental attitudes to formal childcare and preschool programs
- use of informal care arrangements
- preferred models for service delivery, (long day care, family day care, facilitated playgroups, occasional care, mobile service and others)
- correlation between participation in childcare and preschool services and successful transition to school
- cultural relevance of programs and compatibility with Indigenous child rearing values and practices

Research into the impact of state and territory licensing requirements/restrictions for children's services on:

the development/retardation of the Indigenous children's services sector and different service models (family day care, long day care etc).

Documenting case studies of 'best practice' in Indigenous childcare including the transition of informal childcare arrangements into more formal models of care and; facilitated playgroups and on how best to establish and run a supported Indigenous playgroup.

Another major concern for this age group highlighted by survey responses is again, the impact on children of parents substance use, family violence and other protective issues. The cause for concern here is the impact of these experiences on the child's emotional, spiritual and psychological development, learning disorders, and the acting out of aggressive behaviours. Some respondents feel there is a lack of community support in addressing these issues and others are concerned about (non) attachment to caregivers.

Traditionally, Indigenous children have been reared not only by their birth parents, but also by extended family and community members. One respondent commented on the theory of attachment to primary caregivers and its relevance to Indigenous society, given the communal approach to parenting. This respondent would like to see further studies that would include a comparison between non-Indigenous and Indigenous approaches to child-rearing, in particular around the attachment theory and its relevance to Indigenous society.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Comparative studies on child development and the impact of culture and family practices on different aspects of child development, (cognitive, social, physical, etc)

An analysis of attachment theories in the context of communal child rearing, shared parenting within a kinship group and Indigenous child rearing practices

Document case studies (national and international) to show the validity and value of different cultures approaches to child rearing and nurturing

Research on the impact of strong positive cultural identity in Indigenous children on their development across the life course.

Document case studies of 'Good Parenting' for Indigenous children and multiple approaches to growth, development, security & attachment.

## 6-12 YEAR OLDS

The most common concern in relation to development and care issues for this age group, according to responses received is the impact of exposure to violence and family dysfunction and “normal” emotional and psychological behaviours for this age group. Respondents are concerned about children’s aggressive and challenging behaviours, lack of appropriate communication skills, and at risk behaviours.

Some responses indicate children from this age group are not adequately supervised and are often found wandering the streets at night, at risk of physical and sexual abuse. Children are reportedly spending a lot of time escaping domestic violence, which, leads to a chaotic lifestyle, at risk behaviours and disengagement from the education system.

Respondents have identified programs and responses in their communities that do or could benefit this age group. One example is the visiting Indigenous School Health Workers – who work with teachers and school health nurses to identify children at risk. A thorough health check is provided and children are screened in relation to their nutritional needs, substance use, mental health status, scoliosis, diabetes etc.

Other support services linked to education has been identified by respondents as an unmet demand along with integrated activities connected to education such as facilitated sporting or cultural events that involve children and their families, family support services and health services.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Research and evaluate Australian or international programs that utilise schools as “hubs” for the provision of a broad range of family and children’s services; include a focus on urban, rural or isolated communities and Indigenous communities.

## 13 YEARS PLUS

For this age group, respondents are most concerned about the lack of positive role modelling by parents, provision of boundaries and supervision. The named issues associated with this concern were:

- Lack of male role modelling
- Accidents and safety concerns
- Aggressive behaviours
- Lack of self care or life skills e.g. personal hygiene
- Conflict with parents, rebellion and engagement in at risk behaviours
- Identity issues

Many Indigenous young people are given adult responsibilities at this age that could include caring for younger siblings. This was raised as an issue by respondents particularly in relation to these responsibilities impinging upon other activities in the young person’s life, such as education. Respondents are concerned parents put more emphasis on caring for siblings than other commitments. Therefore “parenting” siblings becomes a priority.

Respondents are also concerned about the lack of engagement or provision of community activities such as sports, which is often a priority in a young person’s life, along with other social activities. This often leads to boredom, and consequent substance use.

Transition to adulthood and independent living is made difficult due to all of the issues above which in turn effects young peoples self esteem and self worth. The lack of self esteem and confidence amongst young people is also believed to be learned and inter-generational by some respondents.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Research with Indigenous young men about their perceptions of the significant male persons in their life, what constitutes a positive role model and the way young men choose role models.

Undertake research on how to encourage young Indigenous men to take up nurturing roles within their families and communities including professional and non-professional roles such as fathers, carers, teachers, nurses, counsellors, social workers etc (nurturing and positive role modelling roles).

Research the most effective parenting peer support programs and peer based parenting education and awareness programs for young people.

# PROTECTIVE ISSUES

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## **0-5 YEAR OLDS (INCLUDING ANTENATAL)**

Responses indicate a major concern about the impact of family violence, parental addictions, abuse and other PROTECTIVE ISSUES on this age group. Issues raised by respondents in this area included:

- Psychological and emotional well being of young children
- Acculturation and desensitisation to violence
- Neglect and physical abuse of children
- Impact of experience of trauma at such a young age
- Parental substance use/abuse
- Attachment issues as a result of parental substance use, neglect and avoidance
- Family violence
- Lack of supervision
- Transience and homelessness as a result of other issues
- Historical child caring patterns

Memmott, Stacy, Chambers and Keys (2001) state there are approximately 30 contributing factors to child abuse and neglect. Some of the factors listed by Memmott et al, that were not identified by respondents (for this age group) include poverty, racism, lack of community initiatives to address abuse, and sexual abuse. Memmott et al, claim the incidence of sexual abuse of very young children in (remote) Indigenous communities appears to be increasing, but we need to understand the “socio-historical factors, such as the numerous cases of sexual abuse experienced by Indigenous children in State care” as outlined in the inquiry into the Stolen Generations. (Ibid)

The AIHW (2000-02) reports the rate of Indigenous child abuse substantiation is 3 times more than that of non-Indigenous children, and the rate of Indigenous children being placed under care and protection orders and out-of-home care is 6 times that of non-Indigenous children.

Respondents expressed their concern about the present and future cultural, spiritual, emotional and social well being of children witnessing and experiencing trauma. Some respondents felt these issues and the experience of trauma are a precursor to many lifelong problems in relation to mental health, social, physical and cultural well being. There is a general fear that adult survivors of abuse may repeat the behaviour of their parents if appropriate interventions do not occur. Indigenous people seem to be over-represented in areas of protection and correction at present, which could be

a reflection of the downward spiral Indigenous people have experienced since colonisation occurred. There is plenty of evidence that indicates Indigenous people were maltreated by authorities and supposed caregivers during the times of forced removals. Examples of this can be found in the book “Black Lives, Government Lies”, by Rosalind Kidd, who describes the atrocities experienced by Indigenous people in Queensland during the times of forced removal.

Removal of children from family and community, along with associated over representation of Indigenous children in the child protection system is a major issue identified by survey respondents for this age group.

Concerns raised by respondents in relation to this includes the fear parents have that their children will be removed and consequently parents are reluctant to seek support from services due to a lack of understanding of support service roles, and differentiation from the protective system.

There are concerns about the protective system itself, including the lack of adherence to the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle, lack of understanding or knowledge of culturally appropriate practices, lack of emphasis on reunification, and placement with non-Indigenous carers. There is also an identified need for more Indigenous carers, but a lack of support for these carers – including programmatic and financial support.

Often grandparents, aunts and uncles do take on the responsibility for rearing of children affected by protective issues. When this occurs informally, extended family members do not receive recognition of the role they take on, are not eligible for financial support or do not become aware of the support services that may be available to them.

Responses indicate a concern about the cultural inappropriateness of responses to protective issues and a need for more culturally appropriate family support services. Parenting education programs that focus on family strengths are identified as a method to reduce the incidence of protective issues, involving high profile, and respected community members eg. community Elders.

### ***RECOMMENDATION:***

Research priorities could include:

Research the compliance across States, territories and regions with the Aboriginal Child Placement Principle and factors which impact on compliance including:

- Cultural knowledge, awareness and understanding of staff and others involved in child protection agencies
- Availability of specialist Indigenous agencies in the

field of child protection to influence decision making in relation to child protection matters

- Availability of alternative care placements for children at risk of abuse or neglect
- Levels and forms of support, (financial and non-financial) for fostering children
- Parental and family knowledge of child protection issues (what constitutes abuse or neglect) and the child protection process

Research the impact on Indigenous children of policy and practice that is not culturally relevant including the placement of children in non-Indigenous care

Research factors that contribute to placement stability and promote child well being within out-of-home care

Research the impact of culture and cultural identity in building children's resilience

Research cultural and other bias in the development and application of risk assessment frameworks in relation to the identification of child abuse and child neglect within statutory child protection systems

Research factors which influence the decision making of government child protection staff with statutory powers in relation to the best interests of Indigenous children notified as being at risk of abuse or neglect

Research the impact on children of trauma, including inter-generational trauma, associated with child abuse and neglect, the extent to which symptoms of trauma are recognised and the responses

Research on the experiences and difficulties of Indigenous foster, relative and kinship carers (including grand parents) and how they could be better supported.

Research the benefits of strengths based practice for parenting and family support programs and services

## **6-12 YEAR OLDS**

In addition to the issues raised for the earlier age group, respondents are concerned about the impact on all of the above on the child's attendance at school and the consequences of children not provided with the consistency and learning from their school curriculum. The SCRGSP report states that "in 2002, the early school participation rate was lower for Indigenous children than for other children." (Pg xxxviii)

Respondents fear children of this age group display violent attitudes if this is what they witness at home, as well as other problematic behaviours including succumbing to peer group pressures, and at risk behaviours such as experimenting with substance use and sexual activity.

There is also concern about providing children with an appropriate setting to talk to trusted people about their experiences of trauma, or any other issues in their family life which may be troubling them. Kids Help Line (1999-2003) estimate around 20,000 Indigenous children contacted them during the 5 year period, with the majority of callers (20%) concerned about family relationships.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Consult Indigenous children and young people about who they talk to about their problems or feelings, the importance and efficacy of peer based support programs for responding to trauma, grief and loss and whether there is a need for an Indigenous peer support service based on the Kids Help Line model.

## **13 YEARS PLUS**

Inappropriate expression of sexuality, identity issues, poor education retention rates, and a lack of cultural training are all issues identified in relation to protective concerns for this age group.

Early pregnancies and a lack of knowledge about sexually transmitted diseases are both named in concern to inappropriate expressions of sexuality.

In terms of identity, respondents are worried about the consequences of Indigenous children being raised in foster care, particularly with non-Indigenous care givers and their (possible) lack of cultural awareness.

Respondents say Indigenous young people lose interest in schooling and are unable to concentrate and maintain focus due to issues they are dealing with in the home environment.

Again a lack of supervision for this age group is a concern as well as a lack of appropriate role modelling. Respondents indicate many communities just don't have the resources to assist young people to "stay on track". Many remote communities have very high unemployment rates and young people recognise there is not much hope for them to gain employment so give up on attaining any education.

Some respondents feel all Indigenous teenagers should have cultural history training, which some TAFE institutions currently offer, however respondents would like to see this



delivered in the early secondary years, and feel this would provide young people with an understanding of their traditions and Indigenous identity.

Services have also raised with SNAICC the disparity in the number of child protection notifications for Indigenous children under the age of 13 and those over. Practitioners in our networks do not consider that the actual rates of abuse and neglect for this older age group are lower but rather that issues are less likely to be reported to child protection.

## FAMILY INCOME

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### ALL AGE GROUPS

Generally the same issues were identified by respondents in regards to the impact of family income status on Indigenous children and young people.

SNAICC member organisations have in recent years highlighted issues in relation to the difficulty experienced by young people and families in accessing government income support. Issues such as high levels of family mobility and the reluctance of some families to seek support from welfare authorities have been raised as possible explanations.

The SCRGSP, 2003 reports the Gross Weekly Equivalised Household Income (GWEHI) for Indigenous people was only 56% of the GWEHI for non-Indigenous people (\$282: \$500). According to the report, the gap is even larger when comparing rural and remote area household incomes, for instance, non-Indigenous people in remote areas earn more than their city counterparts, particularly in areas where there are mines.

Respondents identified the following issues when asked about the impact of family income:

- Poor money management / lack of budgeting, numeracy & literacy skills
- Inappropriate priorities e.g. purchasing alcohol & cigarettes before food & clothing
- Baby bonus payments should be staggered over time
- Child care services collect very little money for services provided, but do not push for payment of fees as they feel the children may be pulled out of child care
- Poverty trap – intergenerational dependency on welfare with little or no opportunity to break out of the cycle. One respondent commented that “subsistence income may create a culture of living only for the moment. It is difficult to have aspirations, dreams, plans or goals for the future when you do not have access to opportunity

### RECOMMENDATION:

Research into the operation and effectiveness of child protection systems for older children including rates of child protection notifications, substantiations and service responses for Indigenous children and young people in the 13 plus age group.

Research into the pathways to independence for young people leaving care including models for supporting young people leaving care.

to increase your income levels.

- Inadequate amount of income makes it difficult to juggle your finances
- Nutrition suffers due to the high cost of healthy foods, convenience foods are cheaper and easier to budget
- Lack of income impacts on children’s attendance or participation in childcare.
- Income spent on gambling and other addictions leaves little money left for children’s needs

Some organisations (child care) state they would like to offer training on budgeting and parenting but this requires appropriate resourcing of which they do not have.

One child care centre rewards good fee paying with food vouchers.

Grandparents are often caring for children without any financial support apart from their old age pension. As mentioned throughout this report, this is a significant problem for Grandparents and other extended family members caring for children. Moore (as cited in SNAICC, “Our Future Generations”, 2003, Pg 166) states:

“The various economic assistance schemes available to Aboriginal families are based on models that reflect a nuclear family structure, rather than the extended family which is the primary family structure for many Aboriginal families.”

### RECOMMENDATION:

Research the extent to which Indigenous young people and families who are eligible for various Commonwealth income support payments actually access these payments and whether particularly focussing on families with children, young people not in full time education and unemployed young people.

Research other (international) welfare systems to examine the portability of family income support payments to 'follow the child' and take account of Indigenous child rearing practices and informal kinship care arrangements

There is a general concern about the lack of income to spend on children's activities or learning materials such as books, learning toys and recreational activities.

Cultural obligations are also reported as placing financial strain on families. For instance the cost of funerals and caring for extended family members can prove costly and are usually unexpected expenses.

### 13 YEARS PLUS

This age group is sometimes expected to support younger siblings and/or the family, or even support themselves. Some people feel this age group is neglected to the benefit of younger family members.

This is the age group where intergenerational poverty manifests and develops given the multitude of issues faced by this age group:

- Lack of access or attainment of education
- Limited employment opportunities
- Becoming young parents and providing for their own children
- Ability to access their own income & inability to manage it
- Not having effective or appropriate role models
- Stealing to obtain money to support their own addictions or to support family income
- Lack of support for young people leaving care

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Research on the leisure time activities of Indigenous children and young people across all age and income groups including levels of participation in sporting and recreation clubs

## EDUCATION

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### 0-5 YEAR OLDS (INCLUDING ANTENATAL)

As described earlier under Child Care & Development, respondents state there is a lack of access to culturally appropriate childcare across geographical spheres, as well as a general lack of available childcare in rural and remote areas. One respondent is concerned about the lack of culturally appropriate education in primary school, regardless whether or not children have accessed culturally appropriate childcare.

The majority of respondents state there is a lack of involvement and attendance in childcare. Survey responses indicate reasons why childcare is not utilised as widely as people would like: there are concerns around affordability of childcare, number of available childcare places and a general lack of awareness amongst parents of the benefits of early childhood education.

Comments include:

"Poor parental education means education is not seen as a priority"

"Childcare sources in mainstream are expensive"

"Effect on participation and non participation on entry in prep"

"Frequent moving disrupts engagement in education system"

"Ensure parents are educated about their child's development"

Cadd (2001, as cited in SNAICC, "Our Future Generations", 2003) acknowledges that Indigenous children "...are the only group in Australia for whom participation in preschool education is falling". Cadd argues the MACS (Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services) model should be expanded as they operate on the basis of taking account of all the needs of the child, working with the child's family. SNAICC has identified over 40 major Indigenous communities that could benefit from a MACS centre.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

Research into why Indigenous parents tend not to access mainstream childcare services and the issues around cultural relevance and affordability.

Research into informal childcare arrangements to learn more about why parents use informal childcare.

In regards to the issue of parent education, the SNAICC Parenting Information Project 2004, recommends that parents be provided with culturally appropriate parenting information through informal networks that are mutually supportive and if facilitated, done so by trusted local people or organisations.

Parents and professionals who were consulted throughout the Parenting Information Project indicated they would like to see more a more universal approach to providing parenting support services by co-locating them with childcare. For instance people stated they would like to see more parent support groups and parenting information available from centres such as the Multifunctional Aboriginal Children's Services. Some centres are already providing early intervention support to parents with positive outcomes, such as fathers groups, mothers groups, family days, nutritional information and so on. These groups are usually inclusive of extended family members.

Responses to this survey indicate a need for whole of government responses to identified issues. One respondent states there is a need for a "signed Memorandum of Understanding with the Department of Education, Science and Training and other key stakeholders on education and training matters" to ensure the multiplicity of issues impacting on why Indigenous people cannot have adequate access to childcare are addressed at every level of government.

It is also claimed that existing childcare services do not have adequate facilities or resources. This is particularly an issue for remote and rural centres where it is difficult to collect fees due to reasons already mentioned.

## **6-12 YEAR OLDS**

Again the lack of awareness or education of parents in regards to children's educational needs is a major concern for this age group amongst respondents. There seems to be some level of intergenerational apathy in regards to education and its life long benefits for some Indigenous people. Many respondents feel that parents (due to their own negative experiences within the education system, or lack of education provided to them) are poor role models, which reduces the child's interest in learning.

More support is stated as being required to address the particular needs of children experiencing coping difficulties within the school environment. Outside of school, respondents also feel more support is required such as providing tutors or tutoring skills to parents to assist in active participation in education.

Issues such as truancy, irregular school attendance due to transience and other family issues, lack of appropriate supports in schools and racism have been identified as

reasons why children are not receiving adequate education. Some schools are resourced with Indigenous support workers who visit schools and support Indigenous children by developing individualised education support plans. Some respondents feel there are too few Indigenous Educators and question whether the funding allocation is based on identified need.

Some respondents feel traditional / cultural education should be integrated with mainstream education curriculum.

### ***RECOMMENDATION:***

**Research Indigenous parents' attitudes toward education, rates of children's attendance at school, and what can be done to improve support to families in relation to both these issues.**

## **13 YEARS PLUS**

Early departure from the education system is a major issue for this age group. Reasons include older sibling responsibilities, realising there are little or no employment opportunities in the region so feeling there is no point in educating towards employment (lack of apprenticeships or traineeships), most remote secondary schools ceasing education at Year 10 and so on.

Frequent moving, lack of mentoring and role models, family expectations, are all reported by respondents as being contributing factors to the high drop out rate amongst Indigenous young people.

Many respondents comment that at this age, it is too late to try and keep young people interested in education, and that the valuing of education needs to occur at a much earlier age. The impact of other issues in the young person's life seems to override the desire or ability to complete secondary school and/or tertiary education. Issues such as domestic violence, substance use, gambling, peer pressure, depression, overcrowded housing, poverty, and becoming a parent are all identified by respondents as issues impacting on Indigenous young people and attainment of educational standards.

### ***RECOMMENDATION:***

**Research into the numbers of Indigenous young people who are not engaged full time in either education or employment or a combination of the two and appropriate program based response for metropolitan, rural and remote areas.**

# EMPLOYMENT

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As already described throughout this report, there are a myriad of factors contributing to high unemployment rates amongst Indigenous people. There is common belief that entrenched systemic disadvantage has contributed to the high unemployment rates and lack of employment opportunities for Indigenous people, and there are other factors which put Indigenous children and young people at further disadvantage.

In regards to parental employment status, survey respondents reasoning around unemployment fluctuates between a lack of motivation from parents to seek work, and a lack of employment opportunities. This could be a reflection of the broad range of geographical areas from which we have received responses, given there are more employment opportunities in metropolitan areas than remote areas.

The reasons respondents think Indigenous parents are unemployed include:

- Poor education and training
- Transient lifestyle (forced or by choice)
- Substance abuse
- Choosing to be unemployed
- Culture of welfare dependency
- Low self esteem
- Gambling
- Discrimination

Respondents state that long term unemployment causes boredom, depression, anger, frustration and despair, which in turn can lead to child abuse and neglect, family violence, substance use, and perpetual poverty. All of these situations have an obvious affect on children. Living in poverty leads to a lack of food and nutrition, inadequate clothing, inappropriate housing and/or transience and homelessness (leading to disengagement from education), inability to access childcare due to cost, dysfunctional family dynamics, lack of positive role models.

The impacts of high unemployment rates for young Indigenous people in the 13 years plus age group are described by respondents as:

- Boredom, violence, crime
- Disengagement from education as young people feel there is no point in obtaining an education when there is little employment opportunity (education not utilised), no hope for the future
- Hopelessness, depression, substance use (drugs, alcohol, petrol)
- Lack of positive role models
- Discrimination – young people see the impact of their

parents' experience of discrimination in the workplace or are discriminated against themselves

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

**Research employer attitudes regarding the employment of Indigenous young people in their organisations/companies.**

Respondents state there are few meaningful training opportunities for young people and there needs to be improvements made in pathways from education to training, at an early age to encourage young people to stay in education, and to give them some hope for their future employment opportunities.

Many respondents comment about CDEP (Community Development Employment Program) stating CDEP does not lead to long term employment, and is usually utilised for short term projects. Although CDEP is available there are limited placements. One respondent states the amount of placements do not cater for the demographics of the area, and does not provide hope of traineeships, apprenticeships or further education.

Some respondents see CDEP as a good opportunity to learn new skills and in one area (Murray Valley) a respondent states that "CDEP is the major employer of Aboriginal people, with less than 1% of Indigenous people in that area employed in mainstream business".

## **RECOMMENDATION:**

**Evaluation and research of CDEP programs and where it leads to sustainable long term employment outcomes.**

**Evaluation and research of JPET (Job Placement Employment and Training) type programs (those that link young people back to education and employment), and including the rates of participation of Indigenous young people. This may include:**

- A meta-evaluation of existing evaluations
- Break down of age groups accessing programs to determine whether there is an age range where such a program would be "most successful" in terms of attaining positive outcomes for Indigenous young people
- Determining whether there is a window of opportunity (best time) to successfully engage with young Indigenous people once they leave school with the aim of linking them to tertiary education and/or employment and if so, whether there is a limited time frame for this to occur.

There are a few ideas offered by respondents for initiatives to assist in relieving inter-generational high unemployment rates:

- Indigenous child health workers (where available) should assess the needs and dynamics of unemployed parents to assist them in meeting the needs of their child(ren)

- Encourage CDEP participation, train people to become workplace trainers and assessors or facilitators, incorporate with parenting information and these parents can become peer educators
- Fund Indigenous youth workers to assess teenagers regarding their options for employment or academic stream. Link to work experience.

## HOUSING

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The majority of Respondents overwhelmingly state that most of the children they are in contact with live in inadequate or inappropriate housing.

Where there is disadvantage in other areas of a person's life, there is usually an impact on their housing situation. For example, issues such as family violence, substance abuse, poverty, unemployment and cultural obligations have an impact on housing such as access to a safe environment, housing affordability, transience and limited choices. Added to this situation of disadvantage is of course historical structural factors that impact on the housing status of Indigenous people today, such as the control over land and housing by Governments which has contributed to an under-representation for Indigenous people in regards to home ownership.

The impact of housing status on Indigenous young people and children has been described by survey Respondents as:

- Co-habitation with extended family leading to overcrowding, overcrowding leading to health concerns, lack of sleep and consequent disengagement from education. Overcrowding is the main issue impacting on Indigenous children and young people as identified by respondents.
- High level of transience due to family violence & breakdown
- High level of people living in government housing due to entrenched poverty
- Health concerns due to lack of appropriate housing – lack of sewerage, damage to properties, housing not maintained by government, poor drinking water, rats and cockroaches, lack of heating during cold weather
- Racism toward family when attempting to engage in the private rental market, and high rental costs make it unattainable

Respondents argue the provision of housing should encompass more culturally appropriate policies and

processes. For instance, consultation with regional Indigenous land councils or Aboriginal housing organisations should occur, all relevant government agencies should work with these bodies to ensure they get it right. Housing design and construction should ensure houses are safe, functional and sustainable, but most importantly they should be consistent with Aboriginal housing guidelines.

Indigenous people should have formal decision-making responsibilities in regards to their housing, therefore Indigenous people should be employed in the administration, planning and delivery of Aboriginal housing. Respondents state there needs to be a greater range of housing choices for Indigenous people that are culturally appropriate, for example, homes should have 5-6 bedrooms, up to 3 toilets and 2 bathrooms with large open plan living areas.

In the 13 years plus age group, young people are presenting as homeless and seeking support from services due to reasons such as family violence, sexual abuse and other forms of abuse, family and relationship breakdown and poverty. Responses indicate there are very little suitable options for young people who usually end up going back to the situation from which they escaped, or "couch-surfing", staying with friends or extended family members leading to ongoing transience and homelessness, criminal activity and other anti-social behaviours for the sake of survival.

### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**Research into what proportion of SAAP (Supported Accommodation Assistance Program) users are Indigenous and are they accessing/not accessing these services.**

**Document good practice for services that are engaging well with Indigenous young people.**

**Research into links between homelessness of young Indigenous people and the rates of child protection notifications that are not followed up or substantiated.**

## RECREATION & ARTS

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The main issue identified by respondents in regards to recreation and the arts is the need for cultural inclusion and general lack of recreational options, particularly in rural and remote areas. Despite this, respondents state that recreation and the arts is an area that could build confidence, resilience and self esteem in Indigenous children, that there are positive role models for them to look up to, which would assist in building a positive image of their Aboriginality.

Cultural recreational activities are identified by the majority of respondents as the area needing most attention. Most concede there is a need for inclusion of Indigenous art, music, dance and storytelling throughout the child's life, being an important part of their Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander identity and tradition. People state they want cultural arts and recreation included in childcare programming as well as primary and secondary school curriculum and believe that children who practice their culture have less challenging behaviours. This is supported by the SCRGSP report, which is based on consultations with Indigenous people, who suggested three outcomes that could be achieved by incorporating Indigenous studies in school curriculums:

- “The incorporation of Indigenous studies and Indigenous content in the curriculum makes schooling more relevant to Indigenous students and will lead to better attendance and better educational outcomes for them.
- An improved understanding of Indigenous culture improves the spiritual health of Indigenous students, which leads to better outcomes in areas such as health, family and community cohesion, education and employment.
- Teaching Indigenous culture, history and other Indigenous knowledge to non-Indigenous students will help address the racism of some non-Indigenous people that Indigenous people believe is founded on fear and ignorance. It has the additional benefit of generally creating a broader knowledge and understanding of Australian history amongst non-Indigenous Australians.” (SCRGSP, 2003, Pg 7.2)

### 0-5 YEAR OLDS

Survey responses state there are few formal opportunities to participate in recreation. Responses indicate there is a need for facilitated playgroups where young parents can find peer support, share stories and learn about parenting. There are already some supervised playgroups in existence and respondents indicate these groups are very successful in engaging with young parents. A couple of respondents state they have seen a level of success with mobile playgroups in remote communities.

Respondents state there are not enough safe playgrounds, particularly in rural and remote areas.

Most of the responses received comment on the need for engaging in cultural recreation and arts activities during this age group as extremely important given these are the informative years of development, setting a foundation for future learning and interest in cultural activities.

Some comments received indicate parents opt to spend money on other activities such as gambling, alcohol or drugs, leaving little or no funds available to use for recreational activities.

### 6-12 YEAR OLDS

Respondents would like to see cultural workshops in schools where children in this age group would be immersed in traditional art, dance and drama.

The majority of responses indicate there is a lack of recreational activities available to young people, particularly after school activities and school holiday programs.

Remote areas often struggle to obtain funding for recreational centres or if they do have one, they are not adequately resourced.

### 13 YEARS PLUS

According to respondents, this age group would benefit from concentrated efforts to ensure access to recreational activities and to encourage young people to maintain their interest in sports or the arts. There are some very popular Indigenous role models who should be used as mentors for young people. Feedback indicates there is little or no access to appropriate role models for young people at present, but respondents feel a mentoring system would foster responsibility and confidence building in young Indigenous people.

The SCRGSP report (2003, Pg 7.25) highlights a case study of the Namatjira Regional Sporting Association (Dareton, NSW) that was developed from federal and state funds. Namatjira employed community apprentice landscape gardeners to build their football oval and basketball court, then developed a sport and recreation calendar, which includes an annual trip to Melbourne, visiting the Collingwood Football Club. Children are chosen for the trip to Melbourne based on their attendance, performance and attitude at school each year. Since its inception, the local police noted a reduction of approximately 50% in the incidence of petty crime, and ambulance services noted a reduction in call out rates to the area of 75%. This is a good example of concentrated efforts to encourage young people to maintain an interest in



schooling and sporting activities, and the use of prominent role models as inspiration.

Respondents would like to see more performing arts opportunities for young Indigenous people. There are some established and emerging artists from Indigenous backgrounds who again, could act as inspirational role models for other Indigenous young people.

There seems to be more opportunities for young men in this age group in terms of sports, than there is for young women, and some respondents feel this is an issue that needs to be addressed.

Lack of access to transport, resources and structured activities seem to be a barrier for rural and remote communities. Some feedback from rural and remote located

respondents indicates that although there may be a recreation building in town, they are usually not resourced properly, do not run structured activities through lack of funding (cost is also an issue in poverty stricken areas), and that young people are not comfortable with non-Indigenous people running these centres. Respondents state this is a major problem because young people become bored due to the lack of available recreational activities.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**Given most structured recreational activities have become income based and cost involved, research into how low income Indigenous families can access recreational activities, particularly in rural and remote areas.**

## JUVENILE JUSTICE

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The area of juvenile justice is a major issue for Indigenous people. It is an area where Indigenous people are over represented.

The majority of respondents are concerned that criminal behaviour is being modelled by older members of the family which is having a detrimental affect on Indigenous children and young people leading to learned behaviours and the belief criminal activity is acceptable behaviour.

### **0-5 YEAR OLDS**

One respondent stated that a 4 year old has already been known to shop lift, which they (the respondent) associated with the child's removal from their parents. Some respondents claim young children are actually being taught to shop lift by parents or older members of the family, as children are not subject to criminal charges at this age.

An impact on children in this age group is witnessing the criminal activities of parents and their consequent imprisonment. Respondents feel these children should be taught sound cultural, social and moral behaviours so that they can also observe appropriate modelling and be encouraged to grow up with an understanding of what is socially acceptable behaviour. There is a fear that children who witness criminal behaviour are more likely to become criminals.

Another issue in terms of witnessing inappropriate behaviours of which respondents are concerned about is police racism. Family members who observe overt and covert racism develop a hatred for police, which filters down through the family.

### **6-12 YEAR OLDS**

The influence of older family members criminal activity is a major concern for this age group. The majority of respondents feel children in this age group are being influenced to undertake criminal activity by older relatives. Again, it is felt that appropriate role modelling is required to instil positive behaviour and cultural values.

Respondents are concerned about the way the juvenile justice system operates, and feel that more emphasis is placed on punishing the behaviour rather than exploring the reasons behind the behaviour.

Some respondents feel there is a link between protective and corrective issues and behaviours. They state there seems to be a high level of removal from family for children who are involved in crime. Indigenous children are over represented in the protective system as well as the corrective system but there has not been any research done to explore a possible correlation.

#### **RECOMMENDATION:**

**Research and document any correlation of issues concerning the over representation of Indigenous people in the protective and corrective systems.**

Suggestions to address the issue of criminal behaviour includes a more widespread implementation of Cultural Educators who work in primary and secondary schools teaching core Indigenous values and problem solving skills through storytelling, dance and drama.

## **13 YEARS PLUS**

Over representation continues for this age group, particularly in the area of juvenile justice. The AIHW (2001-02) state that 43% of all young people in detention centres for this period were Indigenous, where Indigenous adolescence in this age group make up only 4% of the wider Australian population.

There is a lack of programs to address the issues associated with youth crime according to respondents. Young people present with a range of issues including substance use, homelessness and crime and respondents state there are little or no funded programs to deal with this range of problems.

By this age, a substantial amount of Indigenous young people would have already begun engaging in criminal activities as a way of acting out through boredom or in retaliation to family issues, or even as a means of income. Respondents say that petty crime leads to more serious incidents of criminal behaviour and young people are then stereotyped.

Respondents working with young people state where criminal behaviour is present, it is always coupled with other issues such as substance abuse, family violence, or homelessness. Therefore programmatic responses need to adequately address all presenting issues. One respondent states that many young Indigenous people who are in detention centres are there because their bail conditions were breached which is primarily due to inadequate service provision to fulfil their needs and address their issues.

Juvenile Diversion Programs has been identified by respondents as a positive step in the detraction of young people from crime but these programs must be adequately funded and resourced to ensure young people are provided with quality support and meaningful outcomes. There is little data available to prove or disprove the effectiveness of diversionary programs, which is an issue that needs to be addressed. (SCRGSP, 2003)

### ***RECOMMENDATION:***

**Undertake research to compare diversionary program statistics and evaluation of programs for Indigenous and non-Indigenous young people in all states and territories.**

Another idea suggested by several respondents is to develop a program that would train Indigenous young people to become mentors to children. Learning from Elders and passing that knowledge down, promoting a positive cultural identity and allowing all ages to participate in the development and growth of Indigenous children, thus giving young people responsibility in the hope this would divert any interest in criminal or dysfunctional behaviour.

Police racism and negative relationships with local law enforcement agencies is also an issue identified by respondents. The impact of this includes a lack of respect for police members and ideations of vengeance against the police.

Finally another issue that respondents feel contribute to reasons behind Indigenous over representation in Juvenile Justice is the lack of available legal aid. One respondent stated that a solicitor from Legal Aid is not provided until the day of court, then proceedings are prolonged which usually frustrates the magistrate and young people don't get a "fair go".

# SIGNIFICANT EXISTING RESEARCH – REVIEWED FOR THIS REPORT

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## **STEERING COMMITTEE FOR THE REVIEW OF GOVERNMENT SERVICE PROVISION (SCRGSP) “OVERCOMING INDIGENOUS DISADVANTAGE: KEY INDICATORS 2003”**

This report, commissioned by the Council of Australian Governments is based on a collection of data that provides identifiable indicators contributing to Indigenous disadvantage. The impetus for the report comes from a commitment by Australian governments to reducing this disadvantage. In consultation with Indigenous people, organisations and departments, a multi-tiered framework was developed highlighting priority outcomes, headline indicators, strategic areas for action and strategic change indicators.

The agreed priority outcomes (sitting at the top of the framework) “reflect a vision for how life should be for Indigenous people...” (SCRGSP, Pg xxi) and should not be viewed in isolation. They are:

- V Safe, healthy and supportive family environments with strong communities and cultural identity;
- VII. Positive child development and prevention of violence, crime and self-harm; and
- VII Improved wealth creation and economic sustainability for individuals, families and communities. (Ibid)

The headline indicators provide measure for economic and social factors that need to be improved, but again, these cannot be seen in isolation from other identified areas for change within the framework. The headline indicators are:

- Life expectancy at birth
- Rates of disability and/or core activity restriction
- Years 10 and 12 retention and attainment
- Post secondary education – participation and attainment
- Labour force participation and unemployment
- Household & individual income
- Home ownership
- Suicide and self-harm
- Substantiated child protection notifications
- Deaths from homicide and hospitalisations for assault
- Victim rates for crime
- Imprisonment and juvenile detention rates

Of these headline indicators, there are a number of areas directly impacting on Indigenous children and youth where further studies in these areas could assist governments and organisations to identify required focus and prioritise policy and programmatic change. For instance, addressing precedence of infectious diseases such as otitis media can impact on early childhood development, speech, literacy and numeracy skills, and retention and attainment of education in Years 10 to 12 can have a direct impact on future employment or tertiary education opportunities.

Addressing other areas will ultimately impact on Indigenous children and youth including future generations.

There are seven strategic areas for action identified within the report, which are underpinned by the strategic change indicators. All of the areas for action and their corresponding change indicators can be directly related to children and young people and are as follows:

- 1 **Early child development and growth (prenatal to age 3)**
  - Rates of hospital admission for infectious diseases
  - Infant mortality
  - Birth weight
  - Hearing impediments
2. **Early school engagement and performance (preschool to year 3)**
  - Preschool and school attendance
  - Year 3 literacy and numeracy
  - Primary school children with dental caries
3. **Positive childhood and transition to adulthood**
  - Years 5 and 7 literacy and numeracy
  - Retention at Year 9
  - Indigenous cultural studies in school curriculum and involvement of Indigenous people in development and delivery of Indigenous studies
  - Participation in organised sport, arts or community activity groups
  - Juvenile diversions as a proportion of all juvenile offenders
  - Transition from school to work

4. **Substance use and misuse**
  - Alcohol and tobacco consumption
  - Alcohol related crime and hospital statistics
  - Drug and other substance use
5. **Functional and resilient families and communities**
  - Children on long term care and protection orders
  - Repeat offending
  - Access to the nearest health professional
  - Proportion of Indigenous people with access to their traditional lands
6. **Effective environmental health systems**
  - Rates of diseases associated with poor environmental health (including water and food borne diseases, trachoma, tuberculosis and rheumatic heart disease)
  - Access to clean water and functional sewerage
  - Overcrowding in housing
7. **Economic participation and development**
  - Employment by sector (public/private), industry and occupation
  - CDEP participation
  - Long term unemployment
  - Self employment
  - Indigenous owned or controlled land
  - Accredited training in leadership, finance or management
  - Case studies in governance arrangements

(SCRGSP, Pg xxxiv)

**RECOMMENDATION:**

That ARACY undertake qualitative long term research that links back to the 7 key areas for change identified by the SCRGSP to assist in providing a more complete measurement of Government performance against the indicators.

**SNAICC PARENTING INFORMATION PROJECT**

SNAICC recently completed a national research project on behalf of the Department of Family and Community Services in conjunction with Swinburne University, in regards to parenting information products and support programs. The

methodology included a literature review, program audit, sixteen focus groups held in eight different locations around Australia, and consultation with over 500 key stakeholders from Indigenous and non-Indigenous organisations.

The focus groups, held in remote, rural and metropolitan areas, targeted Indigenous parents and other caregivers including grandparents, uncles and aunties, as well as professionals working with Indigenous parents.

Key stakeholders and participants of focus groups identified issues that impacted on their family and feedback was sought in regard to existing parenting information and programs.

Health issues, such as nutritional information and drug and alcohol use were seen as major issues for parents. Other major issues included child development information, parenting skills, budgeting and family violence.

Another consistent message from many parents and grandparents during this projects was that they felt confused about how they could and should discipline their children. Many parents told SNAICC they felt their right to discipline children their way had actually been taken away and they did not know how they should go about doing it. Parents told SNAICC children were learning in schools about their rights, ie. parents cannot smack them as they could be subject to notification, yet the children were not being told about their responsibility to respect their parents wishes. Parents feel they have not been taught appropriate methods of disciplining children and also felt that if they may be subject to notification, there was a definite bias that the parent was in wrong from police and welfare workers.

**RECOMMENDATION:**

Research the sort of discipline techniques that work or don't work from both the parents and child's perspective including the appropriateness of different methods of disciplining children at different points in a child or young person's development.

Research the possibility of bias of police and welfare workers toward Indigenous disciplining methods.

Although many respondents believed most parenting programs were not effective (mainly due to being culturally inappropriate) programs reported to be effective were those that included extended family members and were run in an informal way eg. playgroups, where parenting information was actually imparted as secondary to the primary activity.

Parents stated there is a lack of access to (culturally appropriate) childcare in all geographical areas as well as lack of access to education (particularly in rural and remote settings).

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