

Session 17

Forty years on: What do official statistics tell us about Indigenous well being?

Conveners:

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RATIONALE

It is only since 1971 that the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) began collecting comprehensive information on all Indigenous Australians. This has allowed comparisons between Indigenous and non Indigenous Australians and has provided the over-arching framework for policy making. These sessions will examine absolute and relative changes in Indigenous well bring according to these statistics, focussing on areas such as population, health, education, employment and income. The analyses will critically examine the strengths and weaknesses of accuracy and interpretations of these statistics.

Session comprises five presentations:

1. ‘Some Indigenous uses of official statistics’

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ABSTRACT

The paper will examine Indigenous uses of official statistics. raising two issues: a tendency to promote a simple notion of social justice that emphasises ‘equality’ at the expense of ‘difference’; a tendency to emphasise the continuing gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous welfare, at the expense of acknowledging (and explaining) the measured improvements in certain indicators of Indigenous well-being.

2. Brief history of health statistics for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples

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ABSTRACT

Health statistics on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples can be derived from administrative data sets like death registrations, hospital separations and other disease registries, and from surveys such as the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Survey and the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey, and recently, the 2006 Census of Population and Housing. The quality of the Indigenous data has varied especially in their early years. As much of the information in these databases is of questionable quality, changes over time can only be assessed for a relatively short period, and frequently the data available only allow analyses by selected states and territories. For examples, in many jurisdictions, death registration did not contain an Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander identifier until the 1980s. The earliest special survey data dates from the mid-nineties. These data show that the disparities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health status are stark. Despite the short data runs, some areas of improvement can be demonstrated, particular infant mortality, overall mortality and some vaccine preventable diseases.

3. Long-run trends in ‘Practical Reconciliation’: 1971–2006

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ABSTRACT

‘Practical reconciliation’ has been put forward as a framework on which to base policies to address Indigenous disadvantage. This census-based analysis examines trends of Indigenous wellbeing since the 1967 referendum. There has been steady, although not spectacular improvement in basic socioeconomic outcomes in the last 35 years. This finding is somewhat at odds with the common perception of the ‘failure’ of Indigenous policy. More importantly, there is no evidence that the observed trends are sensitive to the gradual implementation of policies associated with ‘self-determination’ between the mid-1970s and mid-1990s.

4. Counting the Australian Indigenous population: 1971 to 2006 and beyond

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ABSTRACT

The size and composition of the Australian Indigenous population has changed dramatically since the 1971 Census of Population and Housing. The number of people who identified as being Indigenous has increased considerably both in absolute terms and relative to the total population up until the 2006 Census. While relatively high fertility rates explain some of this large population increase, changes in the patterns of identification as well as an improved Indigenous enumeration strategy are also a large part of the explanation. In this paper, we discuss a number of the issues involved in measuring the change in the Indigenous population between Censuses, focusing on some of the changes that occurred for the 2006 Census. We also provide a regional analysis of the 2006 Indigenous population and use this to make inferences about how the population might change into the future.

5. Invisible mobilities? engaging with statistically 'un-captured' Indigenous population dynamics

Sarah Prout

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ABSTRACT

A number of aspects of Indigenous population mobility continue to be rendered 'invisible' within standard statistical measures. Yet these statistically un-captured mobility processes are often integral to Indigenous lived experiences and have a significant dialectical relationship to government service delivery processes (Prout 2007). Understanding these population dynamics is therefore a critical, though underdeveloped, consideration in contemporary debates about federal Indigenous policy. Drawing on case-study research findings from Yamatji country, Western Australia, this paper presents a typology of statistically un-captured Indigenous mobility processes, and discusses some of the methodological and conceptual complexities of measuring and interpreting them.