

Bridging the Health Gap: Evaluating community support and policy effectiveness for aboriginal and Torres strait islander well-being

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Abstract

This article aims to compare the current health and well-being conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with the community support provided by the regional council. A quantitative literature review approach is employed as the primary data collection method. Data was collected primarily through document analysis of reputable journals, reports, and news articles. As part of the research methodology, the study also considers the community service activity plan and examines the interventions and programs implemented within the Gippsland area. The literature showed that the health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has been marked by profound inequities with non-Indigenous Australians where disparities are evident in life expectancy, infant mortality, and access to health care. Several measures were taken by the government such as the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031. Furthermore, projects like Warrigunya demonstrate the potential for culturally safe, Indigenous-led solutions to improve health and social outcomes, highlighting the need for continued focus on self-determination and community empowerment. Long-term collaboration between government, community leaders, and Indigenous organizations is essential to ensure the success of initiatives like Warrigunya, which addresses the interconnected issues of health, housing, and social well-being.

Keywords: Aboriginal; Torres Strait Islander; Community Service; Warrigunya; Australia

1. Introduction

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the Indigenous population of Australia, continue to experience significant health disparities compared to non-Indigenous Australians. Among the most pressing concerns is the life expectancy gap, which remains substantially lower for Indigenous Australians. Research indicates that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have a life expectancy that is approximately 8–10 years shorter than that of non-Indigenous Australians (Diaz et al., 2020). Despite various government initiatives aimed at closing this gap, the disparity persists due to deeply entrenched historical and ongoing social disadvantages, including systemic racism, economic inequalities, and the long-term effects of dispossession (Diaz et al., 2020). These social determinants of health have a profound impact on Indigenous well-being, influencing access to healthcare, education, employment, and housing, which in turn affects overall health outcomes.

One of the critical challenges in addressing Indigenous health disparities is the difficulty in accurately estimating life expectancy due to data quality issues and evolving methodologies. Studies have shown that different estimation techniques can lead to discrepancies of up to 7.2 years for the same period, complicating efforts to develop effective policy responses (Phillips et al., 2014). This variation highlights the need for more accurate and culturally appropriate data collection methods to better understand and address health inequities among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Furthermore, while improvements in infant mortality rates have been observed, they have not been

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sufficient to significantly close the overall life expectancy gap, which remains at least 11–12 years (Phillips et al., 2014). This indicates that broader systemic factors continue to impede progress in Indigenous health outcomes.

In the Gippsland region of Victoria, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities face unique health challenges that exacerbate existing disparities. A recent study focusing on Lakes Entrance, a locality with a significant Aboriginal population, highlighted the compounded effects of the 2019/2020 bushfires and subsequent COVID-19 restrictions on these communities (Woodland et al., 2023). The research revealed that these events not only disrupted access to essential healthcare services but also intensified mental health issues and economic hardships among Indigenous residents. Participants emphasized the need for culturally appropriate support mechanisms and the importance of community-led initiatives to enhance resilience and well-being (Woodland et al., 2023). This case underscores the critical importance of developing targeted, culturally sensitive interventions to address the multifaceted health disparities experienced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples in regional areas.

In addition to lower life expectancy, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples frequently encounter racial discrimination in various aspects of life, including public spaces, legal systems, and workplaces. Discrimination has been identified as a significant barrier to accessing healthcare, employment opportunities, and social services, all of which are crucial for improving health and well-being (Cunningham & Paradies, 2013). Studies suggest that individuals who have experienced racial discrimination are more likely to suffer from mental health issues, chronic stress, and reduced trust in public institutions, which further exacerbates health inequalities (Cunningham & Paradies, 2013). Key factors associated with higher levels of reported discrimination include historical removal from family, low trust in government and healthcare institutions, and unemployment, all of which contribute to poorer social and health outcomes within Indigenous communities.

These persistent health and social disparities underscore the urgent need for continued research and targeted interventions to address the structural inequalities affecting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Culturally appropriate healthcare services, increased representation of Indigenous health professionals, and community-led initiatives are essential in bridging the health gap. Moreover, government policies must prioritize Indigenous voices and perspectives to ensure that interventions are effective and sustainable. Addressing the root causes of these disparities, such as racism, economic marginalization, and inadequate healthcare access, is critical to achieving health equity and improving the overall well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Without sustained commitment and action, the health gap will continue to undermine the quality of life for Indigenous Australians, reinforcing cycles of disadvantage and perpetuating systemic inequities.

This article aims to compare the current health and well-being conditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities with the community support provided by the regional council. Specifically, this study will evaluate whether the initiatives and programs that have been implemented effectively meet the needs of Indigenous communities or if gaps still exist in their implementation. By reviewing the effectiveness of existing policies, this article will also identify the challenges that remain and provide recommendations to enhance the well-being and access of Indigenous communities to essential services such as healthcare, education, and employment.

2. Material and methods

This research aims to provide a comprehensive framework for investigating the health and social issues faced by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the Gippsland area. A quantitative literature review approach is employed as the primary data collection method. A quantitative literature review systematically evaluates and synthesizes research studies that utilize quantitative methods, with a focus on numerical data and statistical analysis (Sutherland et al., 2024). By adopting existing journals and previous research, this study seeks to enhance understanding of the conditions and needs of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities in the Gippsland region.

The research objectives are to investigate the health disparities, social challenges, and systemic barriers experienced by Aboriginal citizens in Gippsland, Victoria. This will also include evaluating the effectiveness of community services and initiatives aimed at improving their well-being. Through a careful analysis of quantitative data, the study intends to explore the processes and outcomes of existing community programs, providing insights into their impact on the lives of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

Data was collected primarily through document analysis of reputable journals, reports, and news articles. This method was chosen to develop a deeper understanding of the community's challenges, needs, and aspirations. It aligns with the foundational principle of academic research, which involves building upon existing knowledge and connecting new

findings to previous studies (Snyder, 2019). As part of the research methodology, the study also considers the community service activity plan and examines the interventions and programs implemented within the Gippsland area.

In addition, the study evaluates techniques and methods used by community service providers, focusing on those interventions that directly contribute to improving social and health outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander individuals. This includes assessing culturally appropriate health services, support programs, and other targeted interventions aimed at addressing the ongoing disparities in health and well-being.

3. Results and discussion

3.1. Condition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders in Gippsland

The health of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders has been marked by profound inequities with non-Indigenous Australians. Although there have been attempts at bridging the inequities with numerous health policies and programs, disparities persist in life expectancy, infant mortality, and access to health care (Kelaher et al., 2014). These concerns are becoming evident from several works of literature showing that they have more chronic diseases, including diabetes and cardiovascular disease, and more mental illness. These health disparities lead to a reduced life expectancy, and the difference in life expectancy is thus a high priority for Indigenous health policy intervention to enhance Indigenous health outcomes (Kelaher, 2014).

To elaborate more, compared to non-Indigenous Australians, Aboriginal people face notable health inequalities, including greater prevalences of chronic illnesses including cancer, diabetes, respiratory ailments, and cardiovascular disorders. Particularly high in incidence is diabetes, which frequently results in serious side effects such as renal disease and amputations. Aboriginal communities experience high rates of drug misuse, anxiety, and depression, which are frequently made worse by structural barriers to mental health care, socioeconomic deprivation, and past trauma. Mental health concerns are also a significant concern (Kelaher, 2014). Additionally, the life expectancy of Aboriginal Australians is ten years shorter than that of their non-Indigenous counterparts. The high prevalence of chronic disease, limited access to healthcare, and more general socioeconomic determinants of health like poverty and substandard housing are all major contributors to this disparity. Similarly, avoidable illnesses and poor maternal health outcomes continue to contribute to disproportionately high child mortality rates, underscoring the critical need for focused healthcare measures (Kehaler, 2014).

Access to healthcare remains a major issue for Aboriginal people, owing to geographical remoteness, structural prejudice, and a lack of culturally acceptable services. While programs such as the Aboriginal Health National Partnership Agreements (AHNPA) have improved healthcare access, discrepancies still exist, particularly in preventative care (Kehaler, 2014). Many of the health problems that plague Aboriginal Australians are treatable with early intervention, yet there is frequently little involvement with health services owing to distrust and cultural isolation. The limited integration of traditional healing techniques into mainstream healthcare exacerbates the problem, since many Aboriginal people may be hesitant to seek medical attention if their cultural beliefs and healing traditions are not recognized.

3.2. Government Measures

The Australian Government has implemented several initiatives to improve health and well-being of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. There is a key policy called the National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Health Plan 2021–2031 that aims to provide a comprehensive framework for improving Indigenous health outcomes. This plan emphasizes addressing social determinants of health, including housing, education, and employment, to reduce health disparities. It also focuses on ensuring culturally safe healthcare services that respect the traditions and values of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. Additionally, it promotes Indigenous-led healthcare initiatives to strengthen self-determination and improve accessibility to essential medical services. The plan aligns with the Closing the Gap strategy, reinforcing a commitment to reducing life expectancy differences and enhancing overall well-being (Australian Government Department of Health, 2021).

A central component of the plan is the Aboriginal Community Controlled Health Services (ACCHS) model, which empowers Indigenous-led organizations to deliver culturally appropriate healthcare tailored to community needs (Freeman et al., 2022.) In Victoria, the Victorian Aboriginal Health Service (VAHS) and the Balit Murrup Aboriginal Social and Emotional Wellbeing Framework integrate traditional healing practices with mainstream healthcare (Australia Department of Health and Human Services, 2017). Programs like the Aboriginal Health National Partnership Agreements (AHNPA) have increased funding for Indigenous health services, particularly in rural and remote areas

(Council of Australian Governments, 2012). In Gippsland, the Indigenous Australians' Health Programme (IAHP) funds culturally appropriate healthcare, improving access to primary care and chronic disease management (Australian Government Department of Health and Aged Care, 2024). However, significant challenges persist, including geographic isolation, systemic racism, and insufficient funding for community health programs (Kairuz et al., 2021). These issues continue to affect healthcare accessibility and quality for Indigenous Australians, particularly in regional and remote areas.

3.3. Warrigunya Project: Recidivism Reduction for Gippsland Aboriginal Men

The Warrigunya project was started around five years ago by Uncle Alan Coe, a Wiradjuri, Eora, Yorta Yorta descendant Gippslander, and local Anglican Merryn Stevenson. The project is meant to establish a transitional accommodation complex for Aboriginal men upon exiting Fulham Correctional Centre. The project has garnered support over time from various organizations, such as the Australian Community Support Organisation. Aboriginal men who were inmates at Fulham Correctional Centre designed the architecture of the facility, and Slap Architects further developed it. The construction is expected to be completed by the end of 2024, and the facility will be fully operational in early 2025 (Muston, 2023).

Warrigunya is a not-for-profit Aboriginal organization within the Gippsland region. The organization's key aims are to assist with safe accommodation, vocational training, and cultural revival for Aboriginal men exiting the prison system. As part of community engagement and awareness, Warrigunya offered an information session and free barbecue lunch on July 28, 2023 (Muston, 2023). Warrigunya's overall vision is to create a holistic and integrated post-release response, centered on secure housing as a bridge to reintegration. The program seeks to assist Aboriginal men to transition successfully back to life beyond prison by promoting financial independence and cultural resilience and by minimizing the risk of re-incarceration. The project has a direct impact on the over-imprisonment of Victorian Aboriginal men and aims to enable them to reconnect with their family, community, and culture (Warrigunya News, 2023).

Several individuals and organizations play a vital role in the success of Warrigunya, such as the community leaders Uncle Alan Coe, Merryn Stevenson, Auntie Rhonda Dinsdale, Auntie Maureen Hood, Auntie Jessie George (Terrick), and Uncle Harry Stewart. Organizational support is by way of organizations like the Australian Community Support Organisation, Slap Architects, Vinnies, and the state government, which have lent financial assistance and other support. In addition, community-based initiatives like raffles and fundraising are equally crucial to maintaining the project as a going concern (Warrigunya.com, 2022).

Warrigunya is a key Gippsland project to combat the systemic problem of Aboriginal overrepresentation in the criminal justice system. By providing supported housing, pre-employment training, and cultural connection, the project aims to end the cycle of imprisonment and recidivism. Warrigunya's viability relies on long-term cooperation among government departments, community agencies, and Aboriginal leaders in bringing about long-term beneficial change to its clients (Warrigunya.com, 2022).

3.4. Visitation to Grand Opening of Warrigunya: Warriors Home

After more than four years of planning, Warrigunya officially opened its doors in Darriman, Gippsland, on February 7, 2025 with more than 110 guests attending (Gippsland Times, 2025). The grand opening of Warrigunya Warriors Home was a momentous occasion that united community members, Indigenous leaders, government representatives, and various supporters in celebrating the establishment of a culturally safe space for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, particularly those in need of support. The event saw a strong turnout, with Indigenous Elders and community leaders offering cultural insights and blessings, government officials reaffirming their commitment to Indigenous health and well-being, and representatives from Indigenous organizations and advocacy groups showing their support. Local community members also actively participated, engaging in discussions about the home's future role.

The ceremony featured several culturally significant activities, beginning with a Welcome to Country and traditional smoking ceremony led by local Elders to honor the land and ancestors. Key figures delivered speeches emphasizing the importance of self-determination in Indigenous health and social services, followed by cultural traditional music which showcased the richness of Indigenous heritage. Attendees were then given a tour of the Warrigunya facility, highlighting its accommodations, services, and support programs.

The community response to the opening was overwhelmingly positive, with attendees praising the culturally tailored services provided by Warrigunya, which address housing, mental health, and social support needs. The initiative's Indigenous-led governance was particularly well received, ensuring that the home remains aligned with community

priorities. Indigenous veterans, in particular, expressed deep gratitude, viewing Warrigunya as a long-overdue initiative that acknowledges and supports their contributions and well-being.

The grand opening of Warrigunya Warriors Home was an important event that showed how Indigenous-led programs can improve health and social well-being. While the facility is a big step forward, ongoing support through funding, policies, and community involvement is needed to ensure its long-term success. By focusing on culturally appropriate care and self-determination, Warrigunya sets an example for future Indigenous-focused services across Australia.

4. Conclusion

The health disparities between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples remain a critical issue, exacerbated by systemic factors such as racism, economic inequality, and limited access to healthcare. Even though there have been significant efforts through government initiatives and programs, the life expectancy gap remains substantial, and challenges related to chronic diseases, mental health, and healthcare access continue to affect Indigenous communities, particularly in regional areas like Gippsland. This research highlights the importance of culturally appropriate services, community-driven initiatives, and the integration of traditional healing methods in addressing these health inequities. Projects like Warrigunya demonstrate the potential for culturally safe, Indigenous-led solutions to improve health and social outcomes, highlighting the need for continued focus on self-determination and community empowerment.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest declared by authors in this study.

Statement of informed consent

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in this study

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