Reference No. 148

Summarising: Weston & Gray (2006), *Family and Community Life*
Responsibility for the preparation of this research summary rests with the authors of the MCEETYA report *Education, Training and Indigenous Futures: CAEPR Policy Research 1990–2007* and not the original author(s) of the summarised material.

Title of Research:
Family and Community Life

Research Publication:


Name of Researcher(s):
R. Weston and M.C. Gray (participants in the CAEPR-sponsored NATSISS seminar)

Time period:
2002

Geographic location:
Australia-wide

Methodology:
A review of the community and family life items contained in the 2002 National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Social Survey (NATSISS).

Aims:
The purpose of this paper is to assess the quality and scope of information collected about Indigenous community and family life in the 2002 NATSISS.

Selected findings and insights:
Whilst the prime purpose of the paper was to assess the quality and scope of NATSISS data, the paper provides some interesting information about aspects of Indigenous community and family life, as well as commenting on the value of the NATSISS in this regard.

The paper makes the point that well functioning families are vital to the well-being of individuals, their immediate communities and broader societal groups — this, in turn, is dependent on not only individual members but also their physical and social contexts.

The paper draws attention to the types of ‘stressors’ that influence family and community well-being:

- Health issues, including mental illness, accident, death of a family members or close friend, or serious disability;
- Relationship breakdown, employment problems and ‘risky’ behaviour (alcohol or drug related activities, witness to violence, abuse or violent crime, trouble with police or a gambling problem); and
- Imprisonment, overcrowding at home, pressure to fulfill cultural responsibilities, and discrimination or racism.
Although not reported in this paper, NATSISS data in regard to these stressors, as reported by the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), show that 82% of Indigenous people experienced at least one of the listed stressors during the previous 12 months, and some experienced more than one stressful event during the year. They themselves or a close family member or friend were involved in the stressful event, but in either case it acted as a ‘stressor’ for them in their lives:

- 46% reported the death of a family member or close friend;
- 31% reported a serious illness or disability;
- 27% reported not being able to get a job;
- 25% reported drug or alcohol problems;
- 20% reported a member of the family being sent to jail/currently in jail;
- 18% reported trouble with the police and 18% also reported instances of racism and discrimination;
- 16% reported being a witness to violence; and
- 15% reported divorce or separation and 15% also reported gambling as a problem.

As also reported by the ABS, some 75% of the NATSISS respondents identified at least one neighbourhood/community problem present, with more than 20% reporting each of the following problems having occurred in the previous 12 months:

- theft (43%), alcohol (34%), damage to property (33%), illegal drugs (32%), problems involving youth (32%), family violence (21%) and assault (20%).

For both personal stressors and neighbourhood/community problems, the frequency reported was generally higher for those living in remote areas compared to those living in non-remote areas. In addition to the above issues, the frequency of overcrowding and neighbourhood conflicts reported in remote areas was substantial (42% and 31%, respectively).

The paper addresses in detail two issues - child care arrangements and removal from natural family.

There was a lower use of child care by remote Indigenous people with primary responsibility for children than for the non-remote Indigenous people with primary responsibility for children (57% and 70% respectively), with the main difference being less use of formal child care arrangements in remote areas (16% and 29% respectively).

- The majority of people in remote areas reported having access to formal childcare if needed (69%).

Whilst the paper suggests that due to sensitivities, there may have been some under-reporting of removal from natural family [20% did not report on this item]:

- 38% indicated that they and/or at least one of their relatives had been taken from their family.

Educational implications:

Indigenous students are more likely to experience stressful situations at home than are non-Indigenous students. This emphasises the need for schools to be particularly sensitive to the home life of many Indigenous students and develop student support strategies to address this situation, especially in those cases where student misbehaviour is commonplace. Whole school approaches to behaviour modification, increasing teacher awareness and development of classroom ‘coping’ strategies and provision of student counselling
services would appear necessary in those schools with a large percentage of Indigenous students in order to create effective learning environments. [inservice training] [support services]

Relevance:

Introductory Topic: Culture, Community and Family Life

Domain 2: School and Community Educational Partnerships

Complexity and diversity of communities

Related papers:


